

## **Making sense of mistakes in managerial careers**

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## Structured Abstract

### **Making sense of mistakes in managerial careers**

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Research paper

#### **Purpose of this paper**

The paper provides initial findings on the causes and consequences of problematic mid-career work-role transitions – self-reported career mistakes described by individuals in terms of a mismatch between expectations and reality.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

This exploratory study uses in-depth interviews based on critical incident technique to elicit accounts of problematic work-role transitions.

#### **Findings**

Participants reported mismatches arose because their expectations were based on their prior experience, rather than upon information provided by the organisation during the course of the recruitment process. These mismatches stimulated very active sensemaking on the part of participants, largely focused on finding ways to make their continuation in the role tolerable.

#### **Research limitations/implications**

The present study, which is exploratory in nature, involved a small sample size, and the use of retrospective accounts. The findings are therefore preliminary and may not be representative of mid-career managers' experience with problematic work role transitions. However, they confirm the relevance of career mistakes to organisations and individuals and indicate a need for further research on the subject.

#### **Practical implications**

The study suggested managers moving post in mid-career bring to their new role a range of expectations based upon prior experience, rather than the recruitment process. Further study is needed, but these findings have significant implications for organisations, in that they suggest recruitment processes must provide information in a manner which might overcome or correct these prior assumptions.

#### **What is original/value of paper**

The subject of career mistakes has received little treatment in the organisational side of the careers literature, and yet is of everyday concerns to organisations and individuals.

**Keywords:** Career mistakes, schemas, work-role transition, managers

#### **Abstract**

This paper examines how managers deal with unexpected difficulties in work role transitions (Nicholson, 1990), specifically those arising from a mismatch between expectations and reality. Drawing upon the concept of schemas (Rousseau, 2001), the basis for managers' expectations is explored. It is suggested that managers are

likely to have well-developed schemas (about management and work) and thus, consistent with schema theory, are likely to be more prone to errors of perception when assessing a new job opportunity. A serious mismatch between expectations and reality might generally be expected to cause an induction crisis and voluntary turnover (Wanous 1982). However, it is argued that managers in mid-career are potentially less able to make this early exit, and are therefore likely to have to 'live with' their new career move. The paper explores the sensemaking of managers dealing with such situations.

## **Introduction**

Despite an extensive literature on career management and development, few writers have considered the important issue of career mistakes. Models of work-role transition, such as Nicholson (1987, 1990) allow for difficulties in the early stages of taking up a new post, indeed this is perceived as a normal experience. However, the idea of significant and ongoing difficulty is not considered, perhaps because it is assumed that such cases will lead to exit.

Career mistakes can have important consequences for individuals and organisations. From an organisational perspective, the problem may be perceived in terms of a poor selection decision. In some cases there may be an argument for mutual error – viz. Kevin Keegan's touching admission on resignation that, with hindsight, he wasn't quite up to the job of being England football manager. However, as Wanous (1992) argues, candidates will not want to obtain a post in which they will not be competent, and individuals are reasonably good judges of their own competence. We might therefore conclude that what is poor about the selection decision is that it neglects to involve the candidate fully, i.e. that the selectors assume they can judge both a good candidate and whether the job is likely to meet the candidate's needs. From an individual perspective, the consequences of poor career choices may be very serious. A striking and oft-cited example is Montgomery Clift, widely viewed as the finest screen actor of his generation, who made a series of poor choices of film roles, turning down starring roles in a succession of films which became classics and in many cases made stars of the actors who took these roles.

Poor choices in early career may be significant, but may be recoverable – both because there is time enough to start afresh and because a degree of exploration is generally seen as acceptable. Emphasis on lifelong learning has perhaps increased the acceptability of such changes, although there may be differences between occupations, and also between cultures/societies e.g. the French cadre system is argued to place significant constraints on the potential for career exploration (Dany, 2003). In mid-career, a 'bad move' may have more significant consequences, in two ways. Firstly, because it will most likely be intended to fit in within a career plan, and a wrong move may significantly disrupt this plan. Secondly, the individual is more likely to feel a need to remain in the post for some time, in keeping with the widespread view that too short a sojourn in a particular post is to be avoided on one's CV.

There are a variety of career mistakes, which may be identifiable only with the benefit of considerable hindsight. Some may relate to factors outside of the

workplace e.g. the impact of a decision to relocate upon the individual's personal life. In the context of this paper, we are interested in a particular form of career mistake, namely the situation in which individuals realise, within a short while of taking up their new post, that reality falls considerably short of their expectations prior to taking up the post.

This article draws upon schema theory to outline a theoretical framework for this particular type of career mistake, examining how such mismatch between expectations and reality may arise, and how individuals deal with this mismatch.

## Literature

### Work role transitions

For work role transitions Nicholson (1987) suggests it is useful to think in terms of a transition cycle:

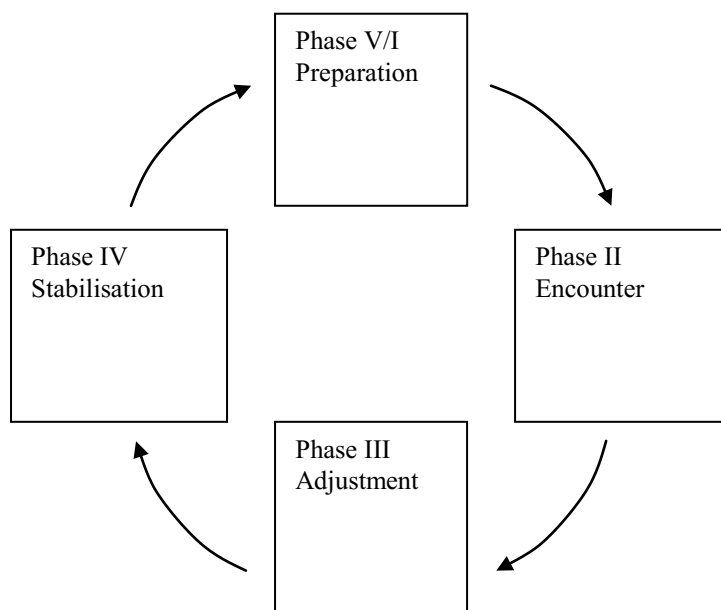


Fig 1: The transition cycle

Stage I (Preparation) involves processes of anticipation prior to change, while stage II (Encounter) is concerned with emotional and sense making activities in the earliest stage of a new role (first few days or weeks). It is assumed that there will be at least some degree of person-job misfit (not unreasonably, since a perfect match would seem unlikely) and thus stage III (Adjustment) involves the personal and role development which serves to reduce this misfit. Stage IV (Stabilisation) assumes that the transition will eventually reach a settled position of acceptable person-role fit.

Nicholson (1990) highlights the importance of recognising the recursive nature of the cycle, arguing that at any time each individual is at some point on one or perhaps several transition cycles. A good example might be an experienced accountant

making a lateral move between organisations – s/he is likely to have reached the Stabilisation stage in terms of occupation, but will be moving through the Preparation/Encounter stages in terms of organisation.

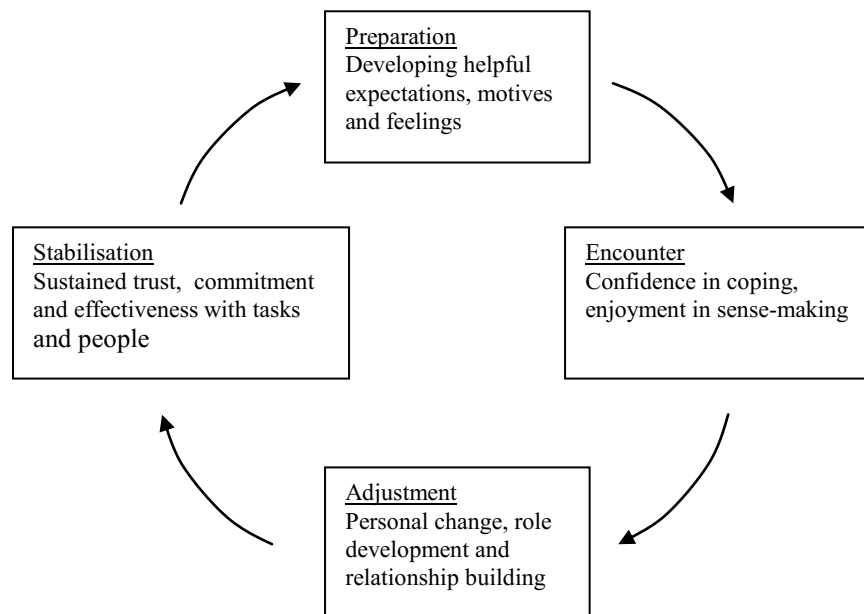


Figure 2: A positive transition cycle

Whilst it may be reasonable to suggest that no transition will be without some difficulties, Nicholson suggests a qualitative distinction between positive and negative cycles. The positive cycle is shown above (fig. 2), and stresses the generally progressive nature of the transition. The negative cycle is shown below (fig. 3), and maps out how individuals might make a work role transition in a manner which is problematic for individual and organisation.

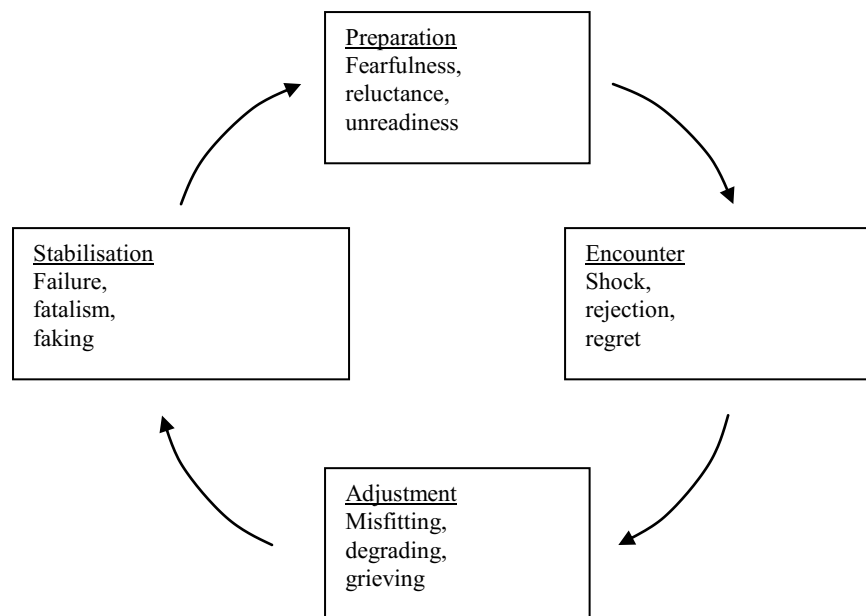
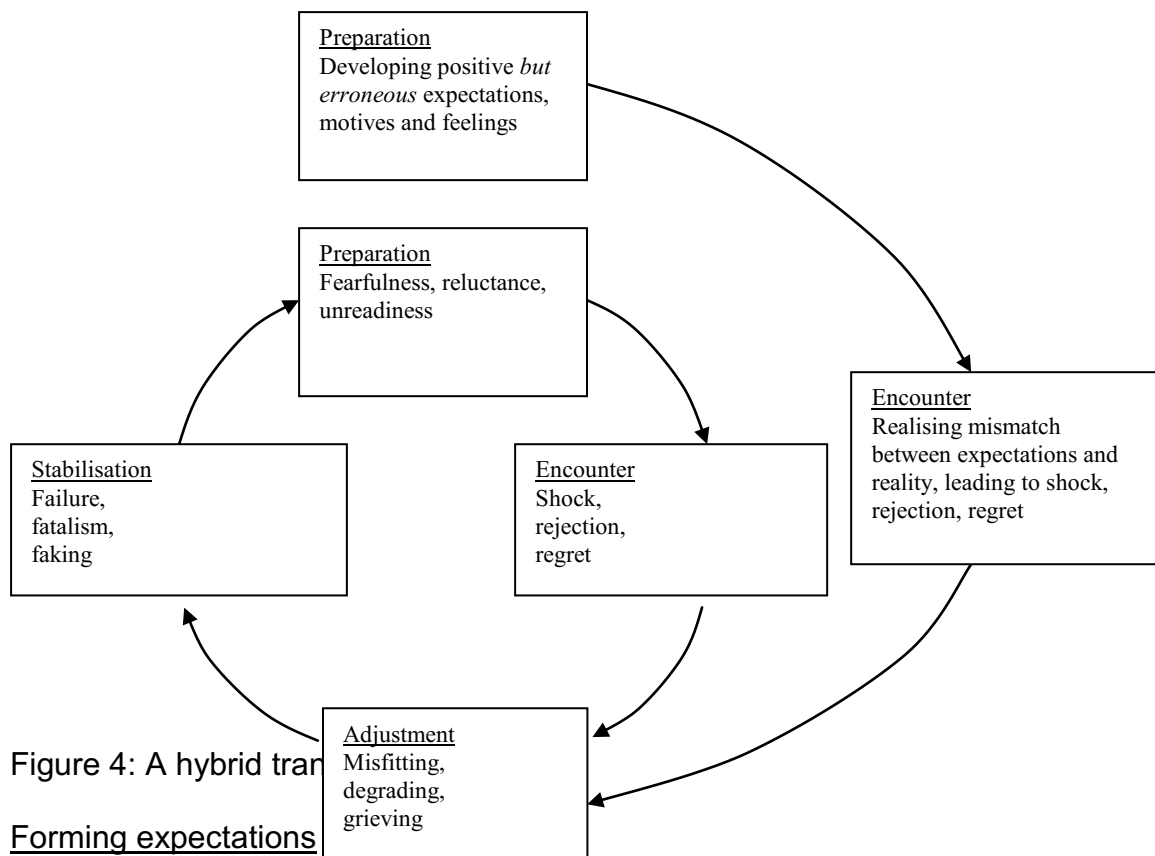


Figure 3: A negative transition cycle

Following Hall's idea of a 'success syndrome' (Hall, 1976), Nicholson (1990) suggests that attention might be paid to the implications of individual experience of positive and negative transition cycles. Since in this context success breeds success, and failure breeds failure, we might generally expect that individuals will be 'locked in' to either positive or negative transition cycles. However, it is possible for factors to intervene which break this pattern. Nicholson cites late-career redundancy as an example. In this article, we will outline a quite different example, based on the Preparation and Encounter stage. The study examines the experience of managers' career mistakes – highly problematic work role transitions which arose because of a significant mismatch between expectations and reality. Nicholson and West (1989) stress the interdependence of the cycle, with experience at one stage influencing the experience at subsequent stages. Where a mismatch occurs, there can be a breakdown between Preparation and Encounter stage – the Preparation stage *appears* to be as for a positive transition cycle (i.e. 'developing helpful expectations, motives and feelings') but in situations in which these expectations are erroneous, the shock of a highly negative mismatch between expectations and reality leads to an Encounter stage which is more consistent with a negative transition cycle (i.e. 'shock, rejection, regret'). We speculate that such a switch from a positive to a negative transition cycle (or vice versa) might occur at any stage, though Encounter does seem the most obvious point, and is the focus of this study. Fig 4. below depicts this shift from positive to negative transition cycle, caused by a misapprehension at the Preparation stage leading to difficulties at the Encounter stage.



Social schema models (e.g. Fiske and Taylor 1984, Stein 1992) propose that we develop schema which act as scripts (cf. Barley, 1989; Goffman, 1959) for our behaviour in certain situations. Although the details and nuances of these scripts may be 'available' to the individual at a conscious level, s/he is unlikely to be able to articulate a comprehensive account of these scripts. Rousseau (2001) suggests individuals with extensive work experience are likely to have more developed schemas about the nature of work when contrasted with 'raw recruits' (e.g. school leavers and new graduates) whose schema about what it means to be employed is, in effect, a specific schema about 'what it means to be employed here'.

Individual managers may have quite different schemas about management. Watson (2001; Watson and Harris, 1999) notes that managers identify a range of experiences as influential in shaping their approach to management and their personal identity. These experiences can occur right across the life-span, and may include childhood responsibilities (e.g. looking after siblings), the presence of role models (e.g. teachers), and positive or negative experience of being managed. We might consider that these experiences serve to shape the development of a role-schema (about 'what it means to be a manager') and self-schema (about 'the kind of manager I am'). Individual managers may well have quite different role schemas arising from their different experience. The differences may be very idiosyncratic (related to unique personal experience) but there may also be discernible trends relating to broad differences in the type of experience. An obvious example of very different formative experiences for managers might be 'up through the ranks' versus graduate entry. We might also expect some differences associated with social class, gender, age, age on moving into management etc. These differences are not proposed from an 'individual differences' perspective (e.g. traits, styles etc.) but

rather on the basis that commonality of experience may lead to individuals having some similarities in terms of their schemas.

The focus of this particular study was on the experience of managers changing jobs, and such individuals will have already gone through a number of occupational and organizational transitions e.g. starting work, changing organisations, being promoted, studying for professional qualifications etc. We might categorise these individuals as 'experienced newcomers', capturing the idea that an individual might acquire significant knowledge and personal history concerning the experience and process of being a newcomer. Managers are likely to have highly elaborated schemata concerning matters such as their professional identity, the nature of the role, being an employee etc., which will impact on any work-role transition - Jones (1983) suggests that 'biography and past experience' will influence newcomers' expectations and their initial experiences. Although social schemas are in some sense 'available' to the individual, it is not a straightforward matter to obtain details of these schemas. This may be a significant issue for organisations and managers, since managers joining an organisation will have existing role schemas which are likely to be different, subtly or substantially, to the role schemas held by individuals already within the organisation. Examples abound in cross-cultural management, where managers working in another national culture find workers have different expectations about how a manager should behave. It may prove difficult for the individual or organisation to represent the content of these schemas in a manner which might promote mutual understanding. Indeed, schemas will typically be so taken for granted that neither party would perceive them or any need to make them explicit cf. theories in use, Agyris and Schon (1978).

#### Expectations – particular issues for managers

Stewart (1997) notes the extent to which performance in a managerial role is inextricably linked with knowledge and understanding of the organisational setting. Managers are thus not 'plug-in workers' (Atkinson, 1984), carrying a particular set of skills and knowledge which can be deployed effectively almost regardless of the organisational setting. Instead, managers require a fairly sophisticated understanding of 'the way we do things round here' (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) and their role performance is reduced until such time as they achieve this understanding. Note however that an alternative interpretation might be that managers are actually at their most useful during this period of unfamiliarity - they see the organisation in a different way to existing organisational members and are thus more able, though not necessarily more likely, to question existing practice and bring new ideas and insights.

The manager is in a particularly difficult position with regards to role expectations, partly because these are likely to be more complex and more diffuse than for the typical worker, but also because s/he is perhaps less likely to be given prompt or detailed feedback. This is most obviously the case in terms of managing staff, who are unlikely to feel able to give their new manager feedback on her/his performance.

Finally, the manager is also more likely to be recruited 'against the grain' of current organisational culture. Bauer et al (1998) suggest that for organisations there is a trade-off between innovation and commitment - see also Jones (1986) and Allen and



Meyer (1990). New managers are often brought in with an explicit agenda to change the organisation, and may therefore be selected for their difference (e.g. in style, background) from existing organisational members. Being recruited on these terms inevitably makes for a more challenging work-role transition. Schneider (1987) notes that an organisation is likely to attract and select individuals who fit into the existing culture, but that in the event that 'ill-fitting' individuals are appointed, they are likely to experience considerable discomfort with the culture.

### Encountering reality

The clash between expectations and reality is examined within the literature on organizational socialisation, which suggests the newcomer will experience 'reality shocks' (Hughes, 1958) or 'surprises' (Louis, 1980) which make him/her aware of the differences between expectations and reality. This is consistent with the idea that schemas change towards a better match with the environment (Rumelhart and Norman, 1978). However, there are two important issues. Firstly, schemas are noted as being stable and not particularly susceptible to change (Crocker et al, 1984). Secondly, reality is not an unproblematic concept here. Although famously arguing for the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that where a view of reality which is shared by a sufficient number of individuals it achieves the 'practical' status of objective reality. In the context of this particular research, the idea of objective reality will be viewed as synonymous with the prevailing view of reality within the organisation, which at the outset the newcomer may well not share. Yet the newcomer's view of the situation is no more or less valid than the incumbent's – indeed, as sometimes observed in case of whistle-blowing, it can be the newcomer's view which is closer to the external world's view of reality. We might consider the newcomer being faced with a choice either to accept the institutional view of reality or hold to a position that his/her view of the situation is more accurate. Note however that the salience of difference is important – many differences in schemas between newcomers and incumbents may be of little significance.

### Managers in career transitions

To summarise. Expectations form and are elaborated over time, in light of experience. Managerial roles are complex, and managers tend to have extensive work experience, and we might thus expect that their schemas are more elaborate than most. However, the nature of the manager's role also means that much is tacit and information on existing, shared organisational schemas about managerial roles may be hard to access. For the present study, these themes raise three sets of questions.

Firstly, in terms of the individual's expectation immediately prior to taking up their post. What are people's expectations at this stage? Where do they come from? For example, are the expectations based largely on existing schemas, or do individuals gather information through the selection process?

Secondly, how well do these expectations match the perceived reality once in post? Do individuals notice differences? How do these differences come to their attention? The schema framework would lead us to expect some degree of filtering

of incongruent information, and therefore we might anticipate some delay in individuals identifying a mismatch between expectations and reality (unless perhaps the difference is particularly striking).

Finally, how do individuals deal with these unmet expectations? Wanous (1992) suggests unmet expectations are a key factor in induction crisis and hence labour turnover. However, leaving the job soon after starting may not be perceived as a realistic or sensible option for many individuals in managerial careers. How do these individuals deal with their situation?

These issues were explored through in-depth interviews with managers who had recent experience of a (self-reported) difficult work-role transition.

## **Methodology**

The research design needed to reflect the exploratory nature of the study. As the research was concerned with how the individual made sense of their perceived mistakes, a qualitative approach was adopted, to attempt to understand the issues from the perspective of the individual. We therefore decided to carry out detailed interviews with a small sample.

A key issue was the question of *when* it is most appropriate to explore individuals' expectations, their experience of difference between expectations, and the perceived reality and their accounts of how they made sense of these issues. An obvious research design would be longitudinal (e.g. interviewing participants before taking up post, in an initial period after taking up post and at a period some time later). The key difficulty with such an approach is that the first stage of the process might serve to 'surface' and reify the individuals' expectations in a manner which distorts the 'normal' process.

The research design chosen involves retrospection, but this is not necessarily a methodological constraint. Rather, it clarifies the need to understand sense making as a retrospective process. Weick (1993) suggests that behaviour precedes commitment, that certain behaviours produce behavioural commitment (Salancik, 1977) and that individuals must therefore seek justifications for their behaviour. Asking individuals to offer a retrospective account of their experience thus elicits the 'sense made' account.

It was noted above that a theme within the literature on organisational socialisation is an emphasis on the importance for the newcomer of key incidents which serve to make him/her aware of the 'newness' or difference of their new situation from previous experience and/or expectations. Following this theme, it seemed logical to explore these issues through the use of interviews adopting a Critical Incident Technique (CIT) approach. By using the 'timeline' approach to CIT advocated by Chell (1998) we might expect to be able to elicit information on:

- individuals' expectations prior to taking up their post, both implicit and explicit
- the ways in which individuals became aware of differences between these expectations and organisational reality
- how they reacted to becoming aware of these differences

It is worth noting an unexpected ethical issue raised by this research design. Although the research questions appeared quite innocuous, it was clear that for some individuals participation in the research had served to re-awaken an awareness of their unhappy situation. More precisely, in telling someone else the story they had told themselves, they seemed to become aware that it was a somewhat unconvincing narrative. At least two of the participants left their jobs very shortly after their participation in the research, despite having been in these posts for at least a year.

### Procedure

The nature of the CIT approach was briefly outlined to participants, and they were then invited to describe their experiences of a career transition which involved changing organisation. Participants were encouraged to relate their experience in terms of a 'timeline', and in most cases the starting point selected was the point at which they first noticed the job in question.

Participants were asked to identify incidents which had caused them to form a view that their initial expectations of the organisation and/or role were different from reality. Questions from the interviewer were largely confined to clarifying the order of events in terms of how participants encountered these incidents. In particular, when participants related events which they identified as significant, care was taken to clarify whether these had been *experienced* as significant or were viewed as such with the benefit of hindsight, cf. Denzin's typology of epiphanies (Denzin, 2001). Consistent with the social schema concept, it seems reasonable to suggest that individuals may be able to elucidate their expectations only by reference to their reaction to actual events. This is illustrated by an exchange in one of the interviews:

Participant: 'When I first started, I had to share an office'

Interviewer: 'So you were expecting your own office?'

Participant: 'I hadn't really thought about it, I suppose it was more that I hadn't expected to be sharing, you know?'

Where participants expressed uncertainty as to the nature of the difference, this was explored, but they were not 'pushed' to produce a definitive description of the difference. This recognised that it is a common experience to have an awareness of something being 'not what I expected' yet being unable to elucidate quite how that something differs from one's expectations.

Apart from these particular elements, the interviews were unstructured and participants were encouraged to offer their own account of their experience as a newcomer to an organisation.

### Sample

Although the participants were not selected as a representative sample, they did have the following in common - substantial work experience (ranging from 8 to 30 years), experience of changing jobs and organisations several times, and experience of working at a managerial level but not at the most senior tier of management (i.e.

not Board level or equivalent). There were 7 participants, 2 men and 5 women, ages ranged between 24 and 48. There was some diversity in terms of sectors, however it is worth noting that all were from sectors in which very rapid career transitions were not common. This meant that all participants were working in a context in which a misjudged career move cannot be corrected in the short-term.

## **Findings**

This section will examine each of the three research questions in turn – looking at expectations, any mismatch between expectations and reality, and finally examining how individuals made sense of this mismatch.

### Expectations - what were they and where did they come from?

Consistent with the organizational socialisation literature, participants tended to cite previous experience and the selection process as key sources of expectations. Considered from an economic-rational perspective, the decision to join an organisation is a significant one, particularly for individuals in mid-career - all participants viewed their change of jobs as a career decision. It is therefore perhaps surprising, though consistent with the social schema concept, that a number of participants acknowledged that their expectations had been formed substantially on the basis of assumptions and inferences, and their decisions were thus based upon very incomplete information. This is of course consistent with ideas of bounded rationality (e.g. March 1988). In particular, participants moving between organisations within the same sector acknowledged that they had made assumptions that their previous experience had been 'typical'. One participant made an illuminating comment:

I had worked for [ N, a local authority ] for 7 years and to be honest I'd always thought they were pretty mediocre....and after I left and they kept getting top ratings in government inspections, I'd talk to friends who'd also worked there and we'd laugh about it and wonder at how they managed it...now I realise that N was actually a very good council and so my expectations...were based on one of the better [ local authorities ] but I'd always assumed it was typical.

The obvious alternative available to this individual was to decide to assume nothing and to rigorously test out her 'hypothesis' that, because of certain obvious similarities, the two organisations would be similar in terms of the experience of being an employee.

One participant noted that various elements of the recruitment process, notably its slickness, led her to expect a well-managed organisation. She expressed a degree of ambivalence in her attitudes around this. She recognised that this was an appropriate recruitment technique and that she had perhaps made too many assumptions about what it might suggest about the organisation. On the other hand, she felt that the process was so far from an accurate reflection of the organisation's normal functioning that it amounted to deliberate deception. On balance she said that she still felt she had been 'sold a pup'. As Schein (1978) notes, recruitment and selection activities take place in a 'climate of mutual selling' and clarity of information is perhaps not always the paramount concern of either party.

### Difference between expectations and perceived reality

The first and most important finding was that the assumption that newcomers would encounter 'critical incidents' was somewhat undermined. Many participants could point to *examples* of incidents but emphasised that these were not epiphanic. It appeared that these incidents were illustrations of an ongoing process of socialization, and that their reporting of these as 'critical incidents' was partly a methodological artefact. In some cases these incidents served to re-frame individual experience, such that previous events were now viewed in a different light. Alternatively, participants offered examples of incidents which, at the time they occurred, seemed unimportant but with hindsight seemed like early indications of a mismatch between expectations and reality.

The second finding concerned the importance of the first day as a formative experience. Several participants had experiences on arriving for their first day such as finding that they had no desk (or office or phone or computer), or their manager was not around, or that no-one in the organisation was expecting them. Reactions to such experiences varied. Some participants reported discounting them, 'making allowances', or accepting the explanations offered for the situation. Others saw the incident as a bad omen, of these some were worried that it might be typical of the organisation whilst others seemed to have immediately drawn firm, negative conclusions e.g. that organisation was poorly managed, unfriendly etc. We might speculate that these different reactions to these very first experiences might serve to shape individuals' subsequent experience, on the basis that they might be expected to look for confirmatory evidence of their initial impression.

### Making sense of the situation

As noted above, the idea of newcomers encountering critical incidents which made them 'wake up to reality' was not typically found. In part this may have been because as 'experienced newcomers' the participants were used to the process of becoming orientated to a new environment and had become adept at it, as seasoned travellers are wont to become. However, several participants also commented on the way in which, with hindsight, they felt they had attempted to resist the 'reality' which they encountered. This 'resistance' took two forms.

Firstly, several participants described experiencing a sense of disbelief - they would observe or experience certain features of their new organisation and yet feel almost unable to accept that these things had really happened. One participant describes an experience of being shouted at down the telephone by a senior manager whom she had never met in person. She was shocked by this and was inclined to think of it as a 'one-off', and it took repeated exposure to such experiences before she realised that rude and aggressive behaviour to subordinates and colleagues was considered fairly normal.

Secondly, some participants described themselves as having made a conscious decision NOT to accept their colleagues' perceptions of reality. One participant noted that she would respond to colleagues' enquiries as to how she was settling in ('How are you finding it?') with a frank reply of 'it's bloody awful actually'. In doing so

she sought to assert her own interpretation of the situation as not normal, not what she was used to, and something she did not wish to tolerate. This is an interesting strategy, as it might appear to allow the individual to function within the organisation, undertaking the role prescribed activities, whilst maintaining one's self-schema through verbal behaviour designed to emphasise consistency in values and attitudes. Interestingly, this same participant nevertheless noted that over time she had grown aware of becoming more similar to the existing staff in attitudes and behaviour, of behaving in some of the ways that she had initially found so bizarre and unacceptable. She dated this shift to a particular incident, a lengthy discussion with her manager, in which the manager set out in an unambiguous manner her view of the basis on which the participant had been employed, a view which was markedly different from the participant's own. One of the interesting facets of this incident, viewed in terms of the psychological contract, is the idea of which interpretation is seen as legitimate. Or perhaps more precisely, whether the organisation (represented by the individual's line manager) is willing to accept that any alternative interpretation is even possible.

In this particular case, the employee was given no 'way out' of the double bind, no opportunity to say, 'it was a misunderstanding, it was nobody's fault'. Instead, the organisation can seem to suggest, 'if there was a misunderstanding, it was entirely your fault'. This creates an additional source of conflict, since in refusing to acknowledge that the employee's alternative interpretation has any legitimacy, the line manager can be seen to imply that the employee is deluded, foolish or deceitful (this may seem an exaggeration, but it is worth stressing that all participants expressed some degree of negative emotions about their situation, and might therefore be expected to make quite negative attributions in the face of apparent lack of sympathy or support from the line manager). If the two parties are willing to concede that there has been a misunderstanding, then some form of rapprochement may be possible. Clearly this is not possible if the employer insists that there has been no misunderstanding, no ambiguity - that the employee is simply mistaken, that her/his interpretation cannot be said to arise from any objective reality.

This situation was particularly negative, and in general those participants who reacted negatively to the differences encountered between expectations and reality described themselves going through a process of looking for 'positives' within the situation. Many expressed a view that their choices were limited, that having just taken up a new job they were not easily able to walk away - some had moved long distances to take up their new post and of course all had given up other jobs. They were therefore aware of seeking to 'accentuate the positive', in presenting their experiences to themselves and others. This seemed to serve various functions, most obviously in making their continued employment more bearable. One participant used the analogy of a balance sheet - by considerable effort on her part, she had managed to find enough positives in the role to outweigh the negatives, but only just. This same person commented that, having done this, she felt unable to change jobs - she had lost confidence in her ability to judge a job opportunity (having made such a mistake in taking her current post) and had concluded that she would rather remain where she was, with the positives slightly outweighing the negatives, than to go somewhere else and risk being back where she started when she took this job (i.e. very unhappy, and desperately searching for positives which might make the job bearable). It should be noted that she had previously enjoyed a

series of positive career moves (Hall's success syndrome) and it is thus particularly striking that just one negative transition had the effect of shifting her into a more negative cycle. The elements of the Preparation stage of a negative transition - fearfulness, reluctance, unreadiness – aptly describe her attitude towards looking for another job.

## **Discussion**

This section will firstly consider the limitations of the study, before considering the central issue of how participants coped with and made sense of their career mistakes. Whilst the small sample size and exploratory nature of the study militate against drawing too many firm conclusions, some possible implications for organisations are sketched out.

### Limitations of the study

Reviewers for this article commented usefully on the issue of the small sample size. We did consider whether to extend the sample by conducting further interviews, but decided that for the present study the original sample of seven managers was sufficient, on the grounds that the study was exploratory, and so we did not have a clear set of criteria which might be used to devise a sample.

The range of variables which might impact on work-role transitions is considerable. On the individual's side, factors such as age, gender, personality, and previous work history. On the institutional side, factors such as size, industry sector, organisational culture, labour turnover and the labour market. Against that background, the present study can only offer some preliminary insights into the processes involved, but subsequent research can explore whether these factors moderate the basic processes described above.

The second limitations is the use of CIT, specifically its role as the only source of data. We have already argued that retrospective accounts were appropriate, and highlighted some of the risks in attempting to gather data on expectations prior to the Encounter stage. However, gathering data solely from the managers themselves does mean that we had no means of verifying their accounts. For example, it is possible that for some participants the issue had been about poor performance in role, but articulating the issue as a career mistake, or mismatch of expectations and reality, represented a more socially acceptable explanation.

### Coping with and making sense of a career mistake

One theme of this paper has been sense-making, an idea associated with Karl Weick, among others. It is useful to note that Weick (1993) cites the idea of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962) as an influence on his work on sense-making. It is clear from their accounts that many of the participants found themselves in situations in which dissonance was a feature of their cognition. Viewed in this light, we can see many of their accounts as attempts to make sense of their situation so as to reduce cognitive dissonance. This theme emerged as more interviews were undertaken, and later interviewees were asked directly about this issue, where it seemed relevant to their accounts. As noted above, some were quite conscious of

producing a mental 'balance sheet', and of seeking to highlight (to themselves and others) the positive elements of their situation. One way in which mid-career managers and professionals may differ from other groups typically studied by researchers on organizational socialisation is in terms of the resources they have available to them to make sense of their situation.

School leavers starting work, if unhappy in their first jobs, have only the most general reference points against which to judge the job, and thus cannot easily decide which of the many explanations for being unhappy at work might fit e.g. whether they are unhappy because they hate the job, the company, the team in which they work etc. They may even wonder whether unhappiness is the natural state of the worker. Balanced against this feeling of unhappiness, they may have relatively few factors which would require continuation in that job e.g. no rent/mortgage, bills etc. The solution seems obvious – to leave, and soon. Cognitive dissonance over!

Our middle managers are in a very different position. They have a surfeit of reference points against which to measure their experience of work, and may be relatively more confident in making a diagnosis of the cause(s) of their unhappiness. However, they are also likely to have many more factors which constrain their choices, in particular the choice to escape unhappiness at work through leaving. They are thus placed in a classic double-bind. The playwright Alan Bleasdale, commenting on his constant surprise at being compared with fellow Liverpudlian playwright, Willy Russell, noted that their plays are about very different things:

Willy's plays are about characters who escape to freedom, mine are about characters who stay behind and go mad.

Our middle-managers are Bleasdalesque characters, for whom a bid for freedom may have too high a cost, and who must therefore find ways to make sense of their situation to avoid madness. The participants in this study appear to be highly resourceful sense-makers, able to draw upon a range of resources to produce sense-made accounts which 'do work' in the sense used within discourse analysis. Comparison might be made with work on career narratives (e.g. Coupland 2002) which illustrates ways in which individuals seek to construct coherent accounts, even for career histories where a claim of coherence appears to test the listeners' credulity.

### Implications for organizations

This study suggests that applicants' expectations about their prospective role and employer may arise more from prior experience than from any explicit information provided by the organisation. This has considerable implications for organisations. Firstly, it suggests that organisations need to be alive to the kind of assumptions which applicants are likely to make about their prospective employer. Secondly, it suggests that information provided with the specific intention of ensuring realistic expectations may fail to register with applicants if their existing schemas are sufficiently robust to remain unaltered by, or reduce their awareness of, this potentially contradictory information. Finally, it seems possible that organisations will have to deal with the negative consequences associated with psychological



contract violations, even when the employee acknowledges that the organisation did not intentionally mislead, s/he merely saw what s/he expected.

It was noted earlier that managers may be recruited with an agenda to change, and a number of participants noted that during the recruitment process it had been stressed that the organisation was seeking different perspectives. Several participants had been explicitly told that they were being recruited to bring in new ideas, one participant noted that he was one of the first appointments to middle-management from outside the organisation, positions having previously been filled by internal promotion only. Yet despite being selected on this basis, their initial experiences were typically difficult and being 'the one who sees things differently' was a source of considerable discomfort. If this discomfort becomes too great, the organisation is likely to lose them through early exit (Schneider's concept of 'attrition'). However an equally plausible response is what might be described as 'attrition in post' i.e. that the individual is able to remain only by 'going native' and thus losing the different perspective which made them so valuable to the organisation and which the organisation took great pains to select for. We might conclude then that organisations seeking to use selection as a source of innovation will need to support those individuals selected with particular care.

## **Conclusions**

In keeping with the exploratory nature of the study, we present our conclusions in terms of propositions which arise from this study and which might form the basis for future research:

Proposition 1: Where two roles appear superficially similar, candidates will neglect to undertake 'due diligence' in assessing the fit between their expectations resulting from former experience and what can be reasonably expected based on the information available prior to accepting a new position.

Proposition 2: Individuals with a track-record of successful work-role transitions will find an unsuccessful transition particularly discouraging. This may lead them to perpetuate their negative experience by moving into a negative transition cycle at the stage of Encounter rather than adopting the alternative strategy of early exit.

Proposition 3: Unless properly supported, managers in mid-career will be particularly prone to experiencing a negative work role transition if recruited, intentionally or erroneously, in opposition or contrast to the prevailing organisational culture.

Finally, it will be important to explore variations in the career environment. It seems possible that in some occupations or sectors, a career 'mistake' of the kind described in this article may be viewed as little more than a temporary setback, whereas in others it may be a misjudgement with significant and ongoing consequences.

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